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SUBJECT: THE "RECONCILER" RETURNS: THICH NHAT HANH VISITS VIETNAM

REF: 05 HANOI 767

11. (SBU) Summary: Visiting Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh and his aides told us that he found the GVN tougher and more assertive in 2007 than in 2005 when he first returned from exile (reftel). However, by developing the trust of the CPV and GVN, he has been able to expand his activities in Vietnam. The centerpiece of his 2007 visit to HCMC, Hue, and Hanoi is a series of "reconciliation prayers" and Dharma talks. The Zen Master hopes to promote unification of all Vietnamese and a Buddhist revival that will lead to greater respect for human rights and religious freedom. Hanh and his staff said they regretted being unable to meet with leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in 2005 and welcomed indications from UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang that he is prepared to meet (more septel). The first reconciliation prayer meeting could be considered a relative success: Hanh's critique of CPV mythology surrounding the Vietnam War to at least a few thousand worshipers was unprecedented, but was studiously ignored by the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha -- the official Buddhist church -- as well as the HCMC media. End Summary.

Praying for Reconciliation

12. (SBU) DPO and PolOff met with Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh March 14 to discuss his plans to promote "reconciliation and real unification" of the country by praying for "all victims of the Vietnam War." The Zen Master -- some say the second most revered figure in Buddhism after the Dalai Lama -- told us he planned to organize three mass prayer meetings in HCMC, Hue and Hanoi as well as a number of additional retreats throughout the country. Hanh explained that without "collective therapy," Vietnam would never be able to reconcile itself to the war, hindering its overall development. (This was Hanh's second visit to Vietnam since he was forced into exile by the South Vietnamese government in 1973; reftel reports on his initial return visit to Vietnam in 2005.)

13. (SBU) Hanh's initial concept was for the prayer ceremonies to mention explicitly all those who died "unjustly" during the war, including U.S. soldiers and Vietnamese who died in "other atrocities," including the Boat People exodus and in post-war re-education camps. Hanh's press aide noted that the GVN wanted to encourage reconciliation with overseas Vietnamese and therefore saw benefit in permitting Hanh to return to Vietnam. However, Hanh and his assistants told us, negotiations over the specifics of the event were more difficult than in 2005. The GVN would not allow any mention of U.S. soldiers, boat people or re-education camps in Thich Nhat Hanh's

addresses. Things remain particularly difficult in the North. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in Hanoi rejected the idea that Vietnamese died "unjustly" as well as the need for a reconciliation ceremony. Nonetheless, Thich Nhat Hanh plans to move ahead with the program in Hanoi as well as in Hue and HCMC.

"Shouting is Not Productive"

14. (SBU) Thich Nhat Hanh agreed that the Communist Party is moving to reinforce its control over Vietnamese society. However, Hanh and his aides added that the question is not whether the Party is tougher now than before the Party Congress in 2006, but whether it can retain control in the face of a myriad of pressures, including globalization and the rise of the Internet.

15. (SBU) Contrasting his approach with that of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), Hanh said he believes that through engagement ("reducing the Party's fear and suspicion") he can achieve more than by "shouting" about Communist abuses. Although the negotiations that led to his 2005 return to Vietnam were difficult, he managed to connect with 200,000 Vietnamese and had extensive dialogue with senior Party cadre in Hanoi. In 2005, the GVN also removed the ban on publication of his collected works -- they are now in the best-seller section in bookstores.

16. (SBU) This year, although the negotiations were difficult, he gained slightly more access, and obtained permission to address the public directly. Hanh therefore can continue to encourage a Buddhist revival among Vietnamese youth. In Hanh's view, the generation of Vietnamese in their late teens and twenties has the international exposure and the capacity to change Vietnam.

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Inculcating Buddhist spirituality into this cohort will lead to greater respect for religious freedom and human rights, Hanh argued. Even the children of senior Party officials recognize the emptiness of Communist ideology and are turning to more meaningful alternatives, despite the objections of their parents. A retreat that he held in Lam Dong Province in the Central Highlands earlier in March attracted over 7,000 persons; 1,000 recent college graduates volunteered as acolytes, Hanh and his staff told us.

Dialogue with the UBCV

17. (SBU) Hanh acknowledged that the UBCV's uncompromising position against single-party rule in Vietnam has given him more "space" to press his more moderate agenda. Nonetheless, he stressed, accusations from the UBCV that he is collaborating with the CPV are unwarranted. "We should be tolerant of each other's approaches," Thich Nhat Hanh told us. In this regard, Hanh's assistants were particularly critical of International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) spokesman Vo Van Ai. In a follow-on discussion after our meeting with Hanh, they told us that Ai's statements in 2005 soured the atmosphere just as Hanh and UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang were negotiating a possible meeting. In the end, "divisions with the UBCV" and the UBCV's decision to insist that a meeting be registered on the official, GVN-approved agenda, made it impossible to arrange.

18. (SBU) In a March 15 meeting in Binh Dinh Province, UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang told the Consul General he would now welcome a meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh. (We will report more Septel on the CG's meeting with Thich Huyen Quang.) On the sidelines of the reconciliation service March 16, we relayed this information to Thich Nhat Hanh's senior staff. They welcomed the news and said that they

would try to reach out to the UBCV. They were unsure, however, if the same issues that prevented a meeting from taking place in 2005 would recur.

The Reconciliation Ceremony: Pushing the Envelope

¶9. (SBU) On the morning of March 16, following last-minute talks with the GVN, Thich Nhat Hanh held the first of his reconciliation addresses at HCMC's Vinh Nghiem Pagoda, the city's largest Buddhist monastery. At least two thousand people were in attendance. The Zen Master complied with GVN demands and omitted any mention of atrocities, boat people and non-Vietnamese combatants.

¶10. (SBU) Nonetheless, Hanh defied a number of Communist Party taboos surrounding the Vietnam War. In what may have been unprecedented public remarks by any prominent figure, Hanh referred to "victims from the North and the South" and said that all six million Vietnamese who died during the war died "unjustly." Hanh explained that East and West Germany were able to achieve unification without bloodshed; Vietnamese leaders could have done the same. He called on all believers, irrespective of faith, to pray for forgiveness and reconciliation. And, in a swipe at the CPV, Hanh noted that while Catholics, Protestants and Buddhists can read their sacred texts as they seek reconciliation and healing, the Communists can "seek spirituality from Marx."

¶11. (SBU) No GVN officials or monks from the GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) attended the public address. Some thirty minutes after Hanh finished his address, a retinue of VBS officials arrived at the pagoda for the official reconciliation prayer session. Thich Tri Quang, Vice President of the National VBS, and a member of the HCMC Fatherland Front, was the senior VBS monk at the ceremony. In scripted remarks that followed the Party line, Quang said that the ceremony was for all those who died in wars "against the French and Americans," and that he hoped the ceremony would promote reconciliation between Vietnamese at home and in the diaspora.

Virtual Press Whitewash

¶12. (SBU) HCMC media covered the reconciliation ceremony perfunctorily, focusing on the statement of the VBS official and ignoring Hanh's more provocative comments. Newspaper contacts told us that they received oral orders from the Party's censors that they should cover the Hanh

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visit with "caution."

Comment

¶13. (SBU) At 81, Thich Nhat Hanh is sharp and physically fit. He was well-briefed on recent Vietnamese political developments. There appears to be little real difference in goals between Thich Nhat Hanh and his erstwhile UBCV colleagues, only differences in strategy and tactics. Hanh understands that the Party is trying to exploit him to bolster the credibility of the official Buddhist Church and to improve its image among overseas Vietnamese. Hanh, however, believes that he has the better of the deal by being able to reach out directly to an increasing number of Vietnamese and to sow the seeds of Buddhist revival. Only time will tell if he is right or if, as the UBCV argues, the Zen Master has struck a Faustian bargain.

¶14. (SBU) Bio Note: According to open-source material, Thich Nhat Hanh, born in 1926, is a France-based monk sometimes described as the world's second most-followed Buddhist leader after the Dalai Lama. After studying at

Princeton and lecturing briefly at Columbia University in the early 1960s, he returned to South Vietnam and helped found a university and Buddhist social services group. He opposed the war and preached a doctrine of reconciliation between North and South Vietnam. Returning to the U.S. in the mid-1960s, He urged Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to oppose the Vietnam War publicly. In 1967, King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1969, Thich Nhat Hanh was the delegate for the Buddhist Peace Delegation at the Paris peace talks. When the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, the South Vietnamese government denied Thich Nhat Hanh permission to return to Vietnam, and he went into exile in France. His return was subsequently denied by the GVN. In 1999, he made an attempt to return to Vietnam, but negotiations with the GVN collapsed.

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